

**RECORD OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION
WITH
MR. OLIVER TRAIN,
PASSENGER ON BOARD THE U.S. PASSENGER VESSEL
*PORT IMPERIAL MANHATTAN***

6 PAGES (INCLUDING COVER)



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RECORD OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

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NAME OF PERSON INTERVIEWED: Mr. Oliver Train
Ridgewood, NJ

INTRODUCTION

I interviewed Mr. Train in connection with the investigation of the fire on board the U.S. passenger vessel *Port Imperial Manhattan*, which occurred while it was underway in the Hudson River near New York, NY on November 17, 2000. Mr. Train was a passenger on board the vessel at the time that the fire broke out. The text that follows is not a verbatim record of my conversation with Mr. Train. It has been constructed from my hand-written notes of the conversation and is correct and complete to the best of my recollection.

CONVERSATION

Mr. Train is a regular passenger on board New York Waterways ferries that operate between Manhattan and New Jersey. He was one of eight passengers on the ferry *Port Imperial Manhattan* on November 17, 2000 when a fire broke out in the engine room.

Mr. Train was sitting inside the main passenger cabin on the main deck. About ½ way through the trip, one of the crewmen came into the cabin, opened a door in the "back" and started spraying it with a fire extinguisher. Nobody was

really paying much attention at that time to what was going on. Mr. Train, himself, was reading his newspaper at the time. It didn't look like a "big deal" to Mr. Train. The crewman sprayed it for "a minute or two" and then closed the door and left the cabin, without saying anything to any of the passengers. Mr. Train recalled that there was one passenger, who had been sitting directly opposite the door, and that passenger was told to move forward, but Mr. Train does not recall exactly when this happened.

A short while later, the crewman returned with a second crewman and they both started spraying a fire extinguisher into the doorway. It could have been at this point that the passenger was told to move forward. After they had been spraying the fire extinguishers for a while, they closed the door and told everyone to move to the "front" of the vessel. The crewmen continued to fight the fire for "a little while." Eventually it must have burned out of control because the crewmen just closed the door and told everybody to "get outside."

Mr. Train went out on the foredeck with the other passengers. He did not have a life preserver at this time. Once they got outside, the lights started to flicker and eventually they went out. Mr. Train does not know if the lights were shut off or if they failed. And then life jackets "sort of appeared." He's not sure where he got his life jacket, but he thinks that at least one passenger ran inside the main cabin after it was full of smoke to get life preservers. Mr. Train does not know if crewmen went with the passenger; he assumes that they did because there were too many life preservers for one person to carry all by himself. They handed out the life preservers and then they closed the doors to the main passenger cabin and then they went to get the life floats, which were stowed on the roof of the pilothouse.

Mr. Train said that everyone's biggest fear was getting into the water. He said that he found it amazing that the vessel was not required to carry inflatable life rafts. He said, "I can't believe it."

Mr. Train said that the passengers were all standing around trying to don their life preservers. He said that the life preserver that he had seemed to be "really small." He said it was a "U-shaped piece of foam wrapped with a cord." He said that he had a lot of difficulty getting the cord undone so that he could don the preserver. He did not have much faith that the life preserver was going to "do anything for him" if he had to use it. He said it was like a horse collar in shape and that it was "either too old or mildewed" because the legs of the "U" were stuck together and it was hard to get them apart.

He said they were all standing on the deck; and they all have life preservers. Some people had their life preservers on; some people were "futzing with them;" and some people did not have them on. Someone helped Mr. Train with his life preserver, but he does not know if that someone was a passenger or one of the crew. He said it was dark and everyone was wearing dark clothes so that it was hard to tell the difference. There was a problem getting the life floats down. Apparently,

they are tied down with a rope and they have to be untied before they can be thrown over the side and then hold onto the ropes. They couldn't get the ropes untied, so they cut the ropes. Since they cut the ropes, they couldn't throw the floats over the side, and had to carry them down the "stairs" to the main deck. So the passengers ended up standing on the main deck with a couple of life floats on the deck. During this time, the fire is getting worse and worse. Then the engines "cut out." Mr. Train does not know if the engines were shut down, or if they failed. He recalled that a news helicopter flew overhead at the time.

There was another New York Waterway Ferry that passed by, but did not stop. The captain of the *Manhattan* was blowing the horn, people were making calls on their cell phones. Mr. Train does not know if the radio on the vessel worked at that time. Obviously, Mr. Train said, either the *Manhattan* could not contact the operator of the passing ferry, or the operator was told not to stop.

The passengers just stood there watching the flames getting closer and closer. Mr. Train said that the doors to the main deck were glass and that he could see orange flames coming out of the door to the engineroom into the passenger cabin. The flames were "getting bigger and bigger." He could see some kind of material in the seats in the "back" was melting. There was a lot of black smoke.

There was a "party cruise boat" standing by the *Manhattan* a couple hundred yards off which shined a light on the *Manhattan*. Mr. Train said, "We were just waiting...hoping that the thing wouldn't explode."

There was a fire boat that eventually came and shortly after the fire boat came, another New York Waterway ferry approached the *Manhattan*. The fire boat and the ferry seemed to be "jockeying for position" to see who would take the people off the burning vessel. Finally, the Waterway ferry came forward. As it came forward, Mr. Train happened to be looking in the back at the inside the main cabin and the flames seem to have died down to "nothing" at that time. As soon as the ferry started to come forward, there was an explosion on board the *Manhattan*. After the explosion, the flames intensified again. Mr. Train speculated that it may have been an implosion of one of the windows. He said that since the fire was burning in an enclosed space, it could have consumed most of the oxygen available until the window broke on implosion, and fed more oxygen to the flames. He said that the explosion happened in the stern part of the vessel, so that he could not really see what it was that exploded.

After the explosion, people started yelling, "Come on, come on, come on! Get us off!" The other ferry came in, bow to bow. The crew opened the gates on each vessel and took position on each side of the gate opening to help the passengers as they stepped directly from the deck of the *Manhattan* to the deck of the other ferry. Once everyone was off the *Manhattan*, the other ferry backed away. Mr. Train said that 30 seconds to a minute later, the flames on the *Manhattan* covered the front deck where the passengers had been standing. Once on the other ferry, the

passengers were taken to a pier in New Jersey from which, Mr. Train and one other passenger were transported to the hospital. Mr. Train received oxygen treatments (for about an hour) and received a drug for asthma [Albuterol sp?] administered by nebulizer while in the ambulance. He said that they gave him the same treatment again once he arrived at the hospital. He said that he was at the hospital 4-5 hours. Mr. Train said that the other passenger who was transported to the hospital was the passenger who ran into the smoke-filled cabin to retrieve life jackets.

Mr. Train said that he spoke to another passenger [who he described as an older gentleman with grayish hair] who told Mr. Train that he had "knocked on the Captain's window" to tell the Captain that the vessel was on fire, that the Captain did not know the vessel was on fire before he did this.

Mr. Train suffers from asthma, and said that he has experienced problems due to smoke inhalation and reports that he still has nightmares about the incident. He said that he has taken a week and a half off from work.

Mr. Train said that he found it hard to believe that vessels like the *Manhattan* were not required to carry sprinklers and liferafts. Mr. Train recommended that vessels such as the *Manhattan* be required to carry sprinklers and life rafts. He offered the opinion that, had there been 20 people on board the *Manhattan* when the fire broke out, there would have been people in the water because, he said, there would not have been enough room for everyone to stand on the "front" of the boat.

When asked to assess the performance of the crew, Mr. Train said that making such an assessment would be difficult for him to do. He said that he did not know what their procedures were supposed to be in this type of situation so he does not know whether they were following them. He said that the crew was not standing around doing nothing. They were moving around doing things – getting life jackets – getting life floats – doing things that one would expect them to do in the circumstances. The crew did not give the passengers a safety briefing upon boarding the vessel. Mr. Train said that he takes the ferry every day and that they never give a safety briefing.

Mr. Train said that he was talking to one of the *Manhattan* crewmen in the hospital afterwards and that the crewman told him, "It's a six-and a half- minute ride, we figure, what can happen?" Mr. Train said, the crewman was right, but "once the engines die, its not a 6-minute ride anymore."

Mr. Train believes that requiring ferries to have a means for people to get off the boat without getting wet is the most important recommendation that he could make as a result of this accident. He felt that this was even more important than requiring sprinklers. He said, "If I have to sit in a raft and wait [to be rescued], I'm willing to do that." Mr. Train said that the *Manhattan* lost propulsion power when it was near 50th Street (New York) and that it drifted into the "20's" by the time

they were removed. He said that they drifted a "long ways" and if people had been in the water in the conditions of darkness that existed and in the cold water, lives would probably have been lost. He also observed that the life jackets on the *Manhattan* were not fitted with lights or whistles.

Mr. Train stated that since there were only eight passengers, three-man crew was probably adequate. However, he further stated that he doubted that the same three-man crew could have adequately taken care of 200 passengers on a burning vessel. Only really instruction related to the use of the life floats. They told the passengers that the life floats were only to be used as a "last resort" and that "we do not want to get into the water."

Mr. Train said that a co-worker of his wife rode the *Manhattan* earlier that day and that she had smelled smoke. [I asked Mr. Train to have this woman contact me.]

END OF INTERVIEW

Donald J. Tyrrell
Investigator-in-Charge